History on UK TV: The Rise of Reconstruction

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Published in:
Spiel mit der Wirklichkeit

Publication date:
2012

Citation for published version (APA):
Sills-Jones, D. (2012). History on UK TV: The Rise of Reconstruction. In K. Hoffman, R. Kilborn, & W. C. Barg (Eds.), *Spiel mit der Wirklichkeit: Zur Entwicklung doku-fiktionaler Formate in Film und Fernsehen* (pp. 255-266). (Close up; Vol. 22). UVK Verlagsgesellschaft.

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Spiel mit der Wirklichkeit

Zur Entwicklung doku-fiktionaler Formate in Film und Fernsehen

Band 22 der Reihe:

CLOSE UP
Schriften aus dem Haus des Dokumentarfilms

Europäisches Medienforum, Stuttgart
Herausgegeben von
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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

ISSN 1433-7673
ISBN 978-3-86764-257-6

Lektorat: Rosel Müller, Freiberg/N.
Umschlagbild: Aus »Todesspiel« (1997) von Heinrich Breloer (Foto WDR)
Umschlaggestaltung: Susanne Fuellhaas, Konstanz
Satz: Claudia Wild, Konstanz
Druck: fgb · freiburger graphische betriebe, Freiburg

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Tel.: 07531-9053-0 · Fax: 07531-9053-98
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British TV History: The Rise of Reconstruction

This essay sets out to trace developments in the use of reconstruction in historical documentaries on UK television between the 1980s and the early years of the new millennium.[243] Before the mid 1980s television history was dominated by two main types of programming: the presenter-led programme and the archive-testimony programme. Whilst some observers have challenged the notion of such a straightforward dichotomy,[244] others are of the opinion that one is wholly justified in distinguishing between two basic models of TV history. For those who take the latter view, the presenter-led model is able to communicate complex narratives more efficiently than the archive-testimony model, whereas archive-testimony programmes are more appropriate for recounting »stories and anecdotes, creating atmosphere and mood, giving diffuse impressions.«[245]

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, history documentaries began to display an ever-greater diversity of formal features. TV history became much more multi-modal and inter-generic than it had been hitherto. As one observer has noted:

> [History documentaries have advanced] from presenter-led lantern lecture … to historically re-enacted dramas, narrated documentaries, re-coloured twentieth-century footage, historical journeying, computer-generated graphics (CGI), explorations of ancient and medieval history, and even historical reality shows.[246]

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243 The essay draws extensively on interviews conducted with producers and commissioners actively involved in the production of TV history programming. The article is based on the author's unpublished PhD thesis: History Documentary on Terrestrial UK Television, 1982–2002 (Aberystwyth University, 2009).

244 Jeremy Isaacs, the former head of Channel 4, claims that a case could be made for a third category of TV history, epitomised by a series of films made by Granada in the 1960s, in which a mixture of approaches is discernible. C. McArthur *Television and History*, London: BFI, 1980, pp. 47–48 and T. Hunt ›Reality, Identity and Empathy: the changing face of social history television‹, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 39, No. 3 : 2006, p. 854 have also noted a mix of approaches in documentaries such as Culloden (BBC, 1964) and Living in the Past (BBC, 1978) respectively.

245 J. Kuehl, ›History On Film: T. V. History‹, *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1976: p. 128.

246 T. Hunt, Reality, Identity and Empathy: the changing face of social history television, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 39, No. 3, 2006, p. 844.

One important strand in the changes that could be observed from the late 1990s onwards was the increase in dramatisation and reconstruction deployed in history documentaries.[247] During the same period there was also a significant increase in the sheer number of history documentaries broadcast on UK television.[248] These two factors – the proliferation of TV history programmes and the increased use of dramatic reconstruction – could be said to have had a major impact on the type of history told through television documentary during this period.[249]

The origins of these changes in the form and content of TV history programming lie primarily in the transformations that were occurring in the television industry in the UK between the 1980s and the 2000s. In 1982, the UK television sector comprised just three terrestrial channels, BBC1, BBC2 and ITV. By 2002, however, 50% of the UK population had acquired access to hundreds of cable and satellite channels. By 2003, 11 of the 15 ITV regional franchises had been consolidated into one central ITV company in an organisational transformation that had taken it away from its roots as ›the people's channel.‹ Channel 4 had also undergone similar changes in its broadcasting priorities. In the course of the 1990s it had become a much less experimental and more populist broadcaster than it had been in its early days. It had also acquired a number of digital channels such as Film4, E4 and More4.[250] Meanwhile the BBC had retained its status as a public service broadcaster financed out the licence fee despite attempts to privatise and introduce advertising.[251] In the course of the 1990s, however, the ethos of the Corporation had been subject to some change following but the cor-

247 See J. Champion, Seeing the Past: Simon Schama's ›A History of Britain‹ and Public History, *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2003: pp 153–174; J. Chapman, J. (2007) Re-presenting war: British television drama-documentary and the Second World War, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2007: pp 13–33; P. Ward, *Documentary: The Margins of Reality*, London: Wallflower, 2005 and K. Williams, Flattened Visions From Timeless Machines, *Media History*, Vol. 13, No. 2/3, 2007: pp. 127–148.

248 See also E. Bell & A. Gray, History on Television: Charisma, narrative and knowledge, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2007: pp 113–133 and D. Cannadine, D (ed.), *History and The Media*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.

249 See J. Corner, Backward Looks, Mediating the Past, *Media Culture and Society*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2006: pp. 466–472; T. Hunt, Reality, Identity and Empathy: the changing face of social history television, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 39, No. 3, 2006: pp. 843–858 and D. Sills-Jones 2009.

250 See M. Brown, *A License to be Different: The Story of Channel 4*, London: BFI, 2007.

251 See P. Goodwin. *Television Under the Tories, Broadcasting Policy 1979–1997*, London: BFI, 1998 and T. O'Malley, *Closedown? The BBC and government broadcasting policy, 1979–1992*, London: Pluto Press, 1994.

poration's ethos had been altered by the introduction of an audit culture and of an ever more active commercial arm.[252]

The independent production sector, which had initially comprised a large number of individual boutique companies serving a limited number of UK terrestrial broadcasters, also went through a period of consolidation, as companies grew in size. This was in an attempt to maximise economies of scope and scale as terrestrial programme budgets dropped, and as independent producers increasingly looked abroad for funding opportunities. Together, these changes amounted to a significant shift away from the public service ethos that had dominated broadcasting during the 1960s and 1970s, and towards a new broadcasting age in which commercial success and audience maximisation became ever more important. During the 1990s, then, history producers were operating in a rapidly changing media landscape.

TV history in a new broadcasting age

I would now like to turn to a particular case study in order to illustrate the kind of impact that the new broadcasting order had on the form and content of TV history. The launch of Channel 4's SECRET HISTORY strand in 1990 was, for many, a clear indication that – as far as its history output was concerned – the Channel's experimental phase was over. Under the leadership of Michael Grade, programme impact and ratings had obviously become of greater concern than they had been under Jeremy Isaacs. Likewise at the BBC in the early 1990s, history documentaries were suddenly required to ›deliver,‹ either in terms of critical acclaim or audience size, Under the leadership of Paul Hamann and Laurence Rees BBC documentaries became increasingly journalistic and contemporary in their orientation. And as far as ITV's history output in the 1990s was concerned, its programming became increasingly sporadic as the channel battled to preserve its audience share in the face of multi-channel competition.

This pressure to maximise audiences and minimise expenditure during the 1990s led to increasing recourse to co-production funding, and a bifurcation in budgets. Before 1990 an average hour of network history cost about £159,000, so programme budgets were arguably adequate for the material being dealt with. Commissioners and series producers would balance budgets across series and strands to cope with any overspend. However, as budgets came under scrutiny and

252 See G. Born (2003), From Reithian ethic to managerial discourse: accountability and audit at the BBC, *The Public*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2003: pp. 63–80 and G. Born, *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC*, London: Vintage Press, 2005.

as the audience fragmented, budgets standardised into two main modes: low volume high budget, and high volume low budget. The higher budget productions could be as much as £1.5 million an hour, and thus required co-production funding. The lower cost model could involve expenditure of as little as £4,000 per half hour. The high budget model made co-production essential, which in itself became an increasingly important editorial concern as the competition for American co-production money increased throughout the 1990s. By the end of the decade, it is arguable that the Discovery Channel, National Geographic and PBS were having a significant say over the content of such high-end productions.

The pressure to guarantee results in the new media environment also led to a centralisation of commissioning, at all the UK terrestrial channels. The BBC created its first history unit in 1989, and between 1994 and 2001 Laurence Rees and Janice Hadlow concentrated the majority of the BBC's spending on history programmes in one unit in London. Channel 4 also became increasingly centralised in terms of commissioning history programmes, and ITV's consolidation led to a natural concentration in the numbers of commissioning executives. While this concentration seems to have coincided with a proliferation in forms on TV history programming – a fact that contradicted any easy association between consolidation and formal homogeneity – the concentration did have the effect of blocking out certain historical voices, whether these were those of the film and video workshop movement exemplified by co-operatives such as Teliesyn and Amber, or the anti-establishment reportage represented by strands such as Secret History (Channel 4), Secret Lives (Channel 4) and Inside Story (BBC).

These changes in broadcasting ecology all had an effect on the way in which the day-to-day production of history documentaries was carried out. Between 1982 and 2002 there is plentiful evidence to show that production schedules, in terms of both in-house and independent production, had shortened. For instance as budgets were standardized and performance targets became explicit in the early 1990s, the amount of time devoted to research declined sharply. At times this led to research being carried out by ever more junior team members, often resulting in a duplication of existing research or in filmmakers resorting to formulaic locations.

Time allowed for programme editing also declined. One executive producer estimates, for instance, that time allowed for the editing of a major series was reduced from 12 weeks in the 1980s to 4 weeks in the early 2000s. Although this could be partly explained by technological advance, it also resulted in a discernible decline in the quality of the editing. As one producer (who wished to remain anonymous) opined: »Some of the time-savings are down to efficiency in editing. But on the whole things are less well researched and less lovingly edited now than they were then.« In addition, whilst the new technologies brought certain cost savings during the 1990s, the cost of employing technicians had also risen steadily. The

introduction of digital editing systems such as AVID did not, therefore, necessarily make the process of post-production any less expensive.

The impact of changing media ecology on TV history production

These changes in filming and editing practices also affected aesthetic choices made by producers and programme makers. In the following section I will examine how some of the changes impacted on various constituent elements of the history documentary: the interview, archive material, the presenter, and finally, dramatic reconstruction.

Interviews

Along with archive footage, interviews were always a main constituent of the prevailing archive-testimony mode of TV history. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, the dominance of the traditional, formal interview was gradually challenged by other techniques, such as those of observational filmmaking and a more conscious ›dressing‹ of interview frames. Dependency on interviews – especially on those used to provide eyewitness testimony – came to be regarded as a barrier to the coverage of certain periods of history. In addition, interviews – even though they still continued to be used – also fell somewhat out of favour, as competition for audiences, often articulated through the needs of American co-production partners, resulted in faster forms of information transfer being preferred.

Archive footage

For most of the 1980s, archive footage, along with the interview, continued to be a dominant element of history documentary. Traditionally, archive had been used, along with any original sound, to give an impression of a past period. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s, archive-based documentaries had, to an increasing extent, become a vehicle for social history, and for excavating unofficial histories from below.[253] Such productions were characterised by the practice of finding interviewees from within the archive footage, therefore anchoring the archive's indexicality, and in turn foregrounding the specific circumstances in which in which the archive footage had itself been produced.

During the 1990s, however, the attractiveness of archive footage began to wane. For filmmakers, the cost of acquiring archive material rose steeply as film

253 This trend is exemplified by a number of series made under Peter Pagnamenta in series such as Palestine (Thames TV, 1978), and All Our Working Lives (BBC, 1984), Nippon (BBC, 1990), and People's Century (BBC, 1995-7).

archive owners began to demand more for the right to access their holdings. By the mid 1990s, established TV history producers such as Taylor Downing were beginning to explore other expressive options. Likewise Laurence Rees, the commissioning editor for the BBC series TIMEWATCH, also began to challenge the status of archive and to begin to experiment with other techniques such as vérité styles of filmmaking.[254] There was even a certain amount of pressure by the BBC2 controller, Jane Root, to limit the amount of archive footage employed in documentary programming and to increase the use of reconstruction and drama based programmes.

Use of presenters

Despite having been a long standing element in TV history productions, The use of presenters had, by the 1980s, lost much of its former popularity with commissioners and producers. Even when presenters were employed, their use was recessive and producer-led rather than following in the charismatic tradition of Kenneth Clark and others.[255] Though no one clear reason emerged as to why presenters were becoming unfashionable, it was possibly thought that the single viewpoint adopted by a presenter might be inimical to a critical and materialist form of history discourse that was dominant in television at the time. The presenter re-emerged, however, in the mid to late 1990s, this time in a less recessive mode and one in which charisma and personality were once again emphasised. Using a presenter became a means of engaging the audience emotionally, and helping a programme to stand out in a crowded schedule. As TV history producer David Dugan attests:

> If you have a voice of God narration, the story can be well told and well written, but you are slightly distanced from it. You can have interviewees with recollections, or if your [topic is] old you are relying on second hand sources from historians, sometimes it doesn't engage in quite the same emotional way. I think that's what caused the need for presenters.[256]

The presenter also offered an economically preferable alternative to archive material. An example of this can be seen in an early example of the resurgence of the

254 Rees was appointed as commissioner of the BBC series TIMEWATCH in 1982 with the remit to improve the strand's performance. He brought a different sensibility from the documentary department of the BBC, which eschewed experts and made films that focused on individual personal stories rather than epic historical narratives. In the first year of Rees' editorship, the series won a BAFTA for the quality of its editing, as well gaining considerable critical acclaim.

255 History documentaries made in the 50s, 60s and 70s were dominated by highly charismatic and authoritative presenters such as A. J. P. Taylor (CHALLENGE, ATV, 1957), Kenneth Clark (CIVILISATION, BBC, 1969) and Jacob Bronowski (THE ASCENT OF MAN, BBC / Time Life, 1973).

256 Interview with author, 2006.

presenter, WAR WALKS (BBC, 1996-8), which was a low budget presenter-led series that achieved surprisingly high audience ratings. It has an authoritative and likeable presenter, who delivers direct addresses on location at historic battlefield sites. This return to the presenter, and the presenter's authority are evidence of the rejection of the materialist, investigative and social history of the 1980s, in favour of a more polemic, authored approach to history.

Dramatic reconstruction

This brings us, finally, to one of the key constituents: that of dramatic reconstruction. Dramatic reconstruction was very rare in the 1980s, and generally perceived to be a threat to documentary realism and credibility. It was also avoided because reconstructions were costly to produce and because commissioners considered that re-enactments made on relatively low budgets looked amateurish and unconvincing. Within the institution of television there was also a cultural divide between producers of documentary and producers of TV drama for television that made things more difficult when attempts were made to forge an alliance between the two.

During the 1990s, however, producers began to make more extensive use of various types of dramatic reconstruction. The first type of reconstruction is exemplified by series such as THE GREAT COMMANDERS (Seventh Art Productions for Channel Four, 1993), SECRET HISTORY (Channel Four, 1989–2004), SMALL OBJECTS OF DESIRE (BBC, 1993), A SKIRT THROUGH HISTORY (BBC, 1994), and TIMEWATCH: FLAMES OF WAR (BBC, 1994). All these series employed a specific form of reconstruction that did not use dialogue, but concentrated rather on small emblematic details in order to create an impressionistic representation. The reconstructions were made in this way to avoid the cost of a more extensive dramatisation, and in order to preserve the credibility of the programmes as documentaries. The attempt was made to create the semblance of archive footage in order to represent either periods or events for which no actual archive footage existed.

Dramatic reconstruction was, on the other hand, still to some extent eschewed by commissioners. In 1995, the independent production company Flashback Television produced WAR: THE INSIDE STORY for the American broadcaster The History Channel. The series contained passages of reconstruction, but was not picked up by Channel Four due to their attitude to reconstruction. As Flashback producer Taylor Downing remembers:

> It [reconstruction] was associated then with low cost, low quality videos you might buy in W. H. Smith, rather than broadcast TV. Dramatising scenes in this way was rather looked down on at that point.[257]

257 Interview with author, 2006.

Whilst The History Channel had not explicitly encouraged Downing to use reconstruction, it gave Downing the freedom to try new forms of expression. In addition, because The History Channel had the wherewithal to commission long runs, more than adequate funding was available for these productions. This gave Flashback Television a valuable additional revenue stream.

At about the same time David Dugan of Windfall Films was commissioned by the American company NBC/ Time Life to produce the series Lost Civilizations (1995) The series was produced for the American market and was never broadcast in the UK. It had a very large budget, much of which was used to create lavish dramatic reconstructions. When subsequently shown at industry conferences the series drew praise from UK commissioners and producers. However this kind of budget was still, at the time, very much out of the reach of UK history documentary commissioners.

Meanwhile at Channel 4, commissioning editor Peter Grimsdale began to move the history output of the channel away from the journalistic approach exemplified by the series Secret History and Secret Lives and started to commission programming that dealt with periods for which no archive footage existed and which required the use of dramatic reconstruction, such as in the case of The Real Georgina Spencer (Channel Four, 1999). As Grimsdale recalls:

> … so I said we are going to grasp the nettle and go back into drama reconstruction. We are going to do it, and do it well. By that time in the late 1990s, there were lots of people who were blurring the boundaries between documentary and drama.[258]

The success of The Real Georgina Spencer led to the commissioning of several history documentaries that used substantial passages of reconstruction in combination with either interviews or archive or presenters, such as Station X (Darlow Smithson for Channel Four, 1999), Elizabeth (United Productions for Channel Four, 2000) and Escape from Colditz (Windfall Films for Channel Four, 2000). Elizabeth in particular was a ratings success and encouraged the commissioning of other similar series.

In 2000 A History of Britain (BBC/THC, 2000–2002) was broadcast, which made extensive use of the ›fake archive‹ mode of dramatic reconstruction. Along with Elizabeth, A History of Britain was credited by many as signalling the beginning of a boom in TV history documentary production. At this point, the use of dramatic reconstruction was clearly entering a new phase. Unlike the earlier phase,

258 Interview with author, 2006.

where small segments of emblematic and impressionistic reconstruction had been employed, there were now substantial sequences of dramatized material incorporated into history documentaries. These were mixed with the other traditional elements such as the use of interviews, archive and presenters. Some programme makers such as David Dugan considered that two clear schools of reconstruction were beginning to emerge:

> [There was] the Starkey school – people in very expensive Elizabethan frocks, beautifully framed, almost looked like a fashion parade, not doing realistic things, lots of poses. Iconic. And then there was our kind of thing, which was gritty but impressionistically filmed, handheld, feeling as if stuff was happening.[259]

A third type of reconstruction which became popular towards the end of the 1990s was a form – sometimes referred to as ›Living History‹ – in which ordinary people from the present day were invited to participate in simulations of the past, 1999 saw the first transmission of the 1900 House (Wall to Wall for Channel Four) a series which introduced a wholly new concept of history reconstructions. Originally commissioned by the Science department of Channel Four, the series was intended as a look into domestic life in 1900 as a way of revealing the impact of technological change on family life. The series followed a family as they were challenged to live for a period of months using the technology that would have been available to them in the year 1900. The programme was greeted with both enthusiasm and wide critical acclaim, and led to a number of other series using similar methods.

An altogether different type of dramatic reconstruction was employed in the series Walking with Dinosaurs (BBC / Discovery, 1999). This production was the result of a major co-production deal signed in 1998 between the BBC and Discovery, which gave the BBC access to a minimum of $175 million (£108.7 million) over the next five years in exchange for giving Discovery the first option of being able to co-fund any factual programming proposal. The overall affect of this move was to bring History, Science and Natural History production under the aegis of a new department, named ›Specialist Factual,‹ in 2000. This deal enabled the BBC to produce a major series that involved extensive computer generated reconstruction. From then on dramatic reconstruction became a more significant trend. As producer Alan Hayling has observed:

> People in the BBC, using Discovery money started to do reconstruction. They used people who were more skilled and who found ways of cutting corners. I

259 Interview with author, 2006.

> don't know how, but it suddenly emerged as a trend, and everybody wanted it, because it was like cheap drama … you got something really good like DUNKIRK (BBC, 2003) which was absolutely brilliant, and it was a full drama made by a documentary department for £600,000 an hour with full battle scenes.[260]

TV history documentaries had thus moved from a phase where reconstruction had occasionally been employed (though without recourse to speaking actors), to one in which programmes were entirely reconstructed using a script performed by actors. To some extent this was the result of much closer co-operation between drama and documentary producers, and of the blurring of the distinction between factual and fictional domains.

PYRAMID (BBC2, 2002) exemplified this shift, in that it marks what the then head of history at the BBC, Lawrence Rees, refers to as »a revolutionary leap« from the earlier archive/testimony formula to a model in which »we used entirely drama, entirely computer generated images, about the building of the great pyramid.«[261] The programme attracted 11 million viewers, which was the largest ever audience for a TV history programme. The success of PYRAMID led to a whole series of programmes being produced on similar themes and topics and employing the same stylistic approach. These programmes appealed to a far younger demographic than was usual for history documentaries. It also showed how, with the assistance of dramatic reconstruction, history documentaries were able to operate in a broadcasting system where there was increasing stress on capturing the attention of a more youthful audience.

Channel Four was not slow in coming up with its own drama-based epic history documentaries, such as ANCIENT EGYPTIANS (produced by Wall to Wall for Channel Four in conjunction with TLC/Canal+/Rai1/NDR, 2003). This series cost around £1.5 million per hour to produce. The success of these productions had something of a bandwagon effect and eventually led to the widespread adoption of acted dialogue in productions such as THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE INDUSTRIAL WORLD (BBC / TLC, 2003), AUSSCHWITZ: THE NAZIS AND THE FINAL SOLUTION (BBC / PBS, 2005), and KRAKATOA: THE LAST DAYS (BBC / Discovery, 2006).

In the period between the 1980s and the early 2000s, producers of TV history had moved from an initial reluctance to use dramatic reconstruction to a much greater readiness to embrace fully scripted and acted films.[262] There were also a number of economic reasons that explain the greater popularity of dramatic recon-

260 Interview with author, June 2006.

261 Interview with author 2006.

262 In spite of the increasing employment of reconstruction in history documentaries there were still some producers who had misgivings about its use – on the grounds that it damaged documentary credibility.

struction. Reconstruction had become cheaper due to improvements in camera and editing technology at a point when archive became increasingly expensive. Documentaries that used dramatic reconstruction were also to some extent beginning to replace traditional drama series, bringing a substantial cost saving to the broadcaster. Dramatic reconstruction also found favour with commissioners on account of its relatively high audience appeal. This appeal – also with audiences in the USA – was helpful in leveraging co-production funding, which in turn had a positive impact on the quality of the reconstructions used. Deals such as the one struck between the BBC and Discovery in 1998 made it possible to secure larger budgets at a time when other genres were having to tighten their belts. The enhanced funding also resulted in higher production values and this in turn lead to heightened audience expectations concerning TV history productions. Since all these developments had been accompanied by higher ratings for history documentary in the UK, it is easy to see why commissioners and controllers saw reconstruction as a key ingredient of a successful history documentary.

The move towards dramatic reconstruction was also driven by the aspiration of individual producers to cover periods in history for which no archive material was available and, more generally, to represent events for which no film footage existed or had not been preserved in the archive. There was, in short, a sustained attempt to widen the expressive possibilities of history documentary by breaking out from the constrictions placed on the form by an over-dependence on interviews and archive material.

The increased adoption of dramatic reconstruction throughout the 1990s and the early years of the new millennium can be seen as the latest stage in a progression of formal changes, with two quite distinct sets of causality and effect. Firstly, the move to reconstruction was motivated by the commercially-driven imperative to maximise audience share in an increasingly competitive broadcasting age – although this brought with it certain risks of not always paying sufficient attention to historical accuracy. On the other hand, the proliferation of channels and the increasing use of co-production money had enabled new techniques and approaches to be introduced which had had an invigorating impact on the ways in which history was presented on television.